

# A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



*Snowy owl*

## FAR NORTH VISITOR

In some circles, the snowy owl is called White Terror of the North. An apt title if you happen to be a lemming or vole – principal food source for this silent hunter of the Far North – scrambling for cover.

Also known as Tundra Ghost, the snowy owl is a handsome bird, and the largest of North America's owls, that regularly dots the wide open of North Dakota in winter. "These birds live and breed on the tundra, but we see them when they migrate to North Dakota when food is in short supply at home," said Chris Grondahl, North Dakota Game and Fish Department outreach supervisor. While in North Dakota, these deft predators shift their diets to rabbits, grouse, ground squirrels and sometimes even carrion.

True to its name, the snowy owl is mostly white, with dark spotting or barring. It has a rounded head, yellow eyes, black bill, and a wingspan of 5 feet.

Scientists tell us special downy structures on the snowy owl's feathers allows for flight quiet as a whisper. Silence on the wing enables the predator to hear the movement of prey, and not vice versa. "As I approached the partridge I shot, this snowy owl came in silently over my head, landed on my bird and then carried it away," Grondahl said. "The highest predator didn't go home with game that day. The owl won out."

Snowy owls don't breed here, but rather at home in the Far North. During courtship, males bow, fluff feathers and strut with wings spread and dragging the ground, scientists say. The birds nest on the ground, typically on a barren rise that commands a view of the surroundings. Nests are simple depressions scraped out of the ground and lined with moss and feathers.

During low lemming years – times when more snowy owls may be found in North Dakota than not – these birds sometimes don't nest at all. When food is plentiful, however, snowy owls can lay as many as 14 eggs. Incubation duties fall to the female, while the male brings her food and guards the nest.

A snowy owl resting on a power line, haystack or barren bump in the terrain in North Dakota is as conspicuous as its flight is discreet. For passersby, spotting one of these birds more typical of the mysterious, isolated arctic is a real treat.

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